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## The 'Faith' of an Atheist

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*Louise Antony*

## The 'Faith' of an Atheist

Louise Antony

Several years ago, in Raleigh, North Carolina, I attended a debate between the well-known fundamentalist theologian and preacher, William Lane Craig, and my then colleague, a Hobbes scholar and philosopher of science, Douglas Jesseph.<sup>1</sup> The audience, packed with Christian students bussed in from campuses all over the state, voted to determine the winner. Despite a good showing from the region's infidel-infested philosophy departments, Craig won in a landslide. No surprise; Doug's feelings weren't hurt. But for my daughter, then an eight-year-old evangelical atheist who had been brought up in a home in which a well-wrought counterexample had the power to restore lost television privileges, the verdict was disheartening. "Doug's arguments were better," she pouted, "and they don't even care."

Indeed. Doug's arguments were better, and it was not only the audience who didn't care. Craig himself didn't care. He wasn't trying to persuade the atheists in the audience of anything – instead, his entire presentation was a set piece, a performance designed to reassure the faithful that a Christian could mix it up with a scientifically sophisticated secularist and come out on top. "You don't have to be embarrassed to be a believer" was the point of the exercise – and whatever Doug said, Craig was going to counter with a reiteration of that message. Craig's favorite tactic was to quote distinguished analytic philosophers to support his pro-God position – sometimes avowedly Christian philosophers, like Alvin Plantinga, but sometimes – to the great delight of the audience – secularist thinkers whose words Craig would twist to his own purpose.

Now Doug *was* trying to persuade people – or rather, he was trying to make good arguments that would be persuasive to anyone prepared to consider the matter on its merits. He didn't think he had much chance of success, because he didn't think that many people there *were* prepared to consider the matter on its merits. I didn't think he had much chance of success either, but for a slightly different reason. I don't want to say that the audience was full of close-minded people. I happen to think that if one has thought very hard for a long time about an issue, and come to some conclusion, then it's unlikely that something one hears in the space of a two hour debate is going to change one's mind. I don't think it necessarily *should* change one's mind.

I am, after all, a philosophy teacher – it's my job to raise puzzling questions about things that students came to my class taking for granted, and I'm good enough at it that I can often raise objections that my students cannot figure out how to answer – at least not in the space of a class period. Indeed, what would I think if a student came up to me after a lecture on skepticism and announced that, on the strength of the considerations raised in class, she had given up a number of her most fundamental beliefs, that she was now genuinely unsure whether she had a body, whether I had a mind, or if the world had been

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created seven minutes ago, and could I please help? Horrors! The point I generally mean to be making with such lectures is that there's a puzzle to be worked out, a knot to be untied: On the one hand, there are these beliefs that it seems impossible to shed – belief in the external world, in the existence of other minds, in the reality of the past – and on the other hand, there are these apparently good arguments that seem to say that I have no justification for holding on to them. The puzzle doesn't get solved if you just give up and say "OK – you win; I don't know any of those things after all;" it's only a puzzle in the first place because of the fact that giving up these beliefs is not really a practical option. (With this point in mind, let me call attention to Cleanthes's *ad hominem* against the skeptic Philo in Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*: "Whether your scepticism be as absolute and sincere as you pretend, we shall learn by and by, when the company breaks up: We shall then see, whether you go out at the door or the window."<sup>2</sup>) When we get down to the business of figuring out what we actually think about things, how could a philosophical argument *ever* carry the day against something as banally certain as that I have a body?

Now what I think is that for many religious people, belief in God is as basic, as fundamental, and as unassailable as my belief in my own physical reality.<sup>3</sup> I suspect that this was true for many of the audience members the night of that debate. And I imagine that Doug's arguments struck them rather the way I think arguments for skepticism *ought* to strike any sensible person – as puzzles, intellectual exercises, the good of which in this case – though it was certainly not Doug's intention that his arguments would serve this end – would manifest itself, ultimately, in the strengthening of their faith.

OK, but is belief in God really basic in the same way as belief in the external world or belief in other minds? What makes these last two beliefs fundamental is the way in which they are implicated in virtually everything we do and say, on a daily basis. We do, like Hume's Philo, leave rooms by their doors and not by their windows, because we really do believe there are bodies and that, when unsupported by floors or stairs, these bodies fall, and crash to the floor, and that if the crashing body is ours, it will hurt quite a lot. Solipsism – skepticism about other minds – isn't an option, at least for the vast majority of us, because our world is so thoroughly social, and because the only way to negotiate a socially complex world is by treating the people in it as having beliefs, desires, and feelings. Would we ever venture into traffic if we seriously doubted that there were minds controlling those half-ton tin cans rocketing along the streets? Indeed, Philo's response to Cleanthes's challenge was to point out the unliveability of a thorough-going skepticism:

To whatever length any one may push his speculative principles of scepticism, he must act, I own, and live, and converse, like other men; and for this conduct he is not obliged to give any other reason, than the absolute necessity he lies under of so doing.<sup>4</sup>

Hume is, I believe, pointing to a way of justifying belief that is somewhat different from the kind of evidential or logical justification that we prize so

highly in science and philosophy. It is a *pragmatic* justification of belief: it is to say, "believing this is imperative if I am to live the kind of life I want to live, the kind of life that is worth living."<sup>5</sup>

What makes life worth living? I don't pretend to have the definitive list, but see if you don't agree that the following items, at least, ought to be on it:

*moral value* – a kind of goodness that is different from that which I happen to like or want or feel good about; a kind that is objective in that it

belongs to the world, and in the world; a kind that exerts a pull on us to behave in certain ways and not in others.

*meaning* – something that our lives, and our activities within it, are for; a purpose or significance; something transformative, something to ward off the absurd, to distinguish the motions and sounds

of our bodies from the pointless frenzy of mindless matter.

*love* – a depth of feeling for someone, and even for some things, outside ourselves; the possibility of genuine connection with others, an end to loneliness.

I'm sure this list is not complete,<sup>6</sup> but it will do for now. Now here's what I believe theists think: God is the *sine qua non* of all of these things. It is God who grounds objective moral value, God who gives meaning and purpose to our lives, God who is the original and most capacious source of love. This, for theists is the "absolute necessity" under which they lie: a life worth living requires God.

But I think that theists are inclined to go one step further: it's not just that God is the ground of morality, meaning, and love – it's that *belief in God* is necessary for the realization of morality, meaning, and love. They think, in other words, that there is something additional required for human beings to achieve a life worth living, namely:

*faith* – we have need of some kind of sustaining belief that lives worth living are lives it is *possible* to live. There is a great deal in our experience to threaten the notion that there is objective moral value in the world, that our individual existence has worth or value at all, that love can be found. Something must be there in the background that we can turn to, to reassure ourselves, even in the face of massive evidence to the contrary, that there is reason to go on.

Now I agree that *faith* – in the sense I've just laid out – is, as a practical matter, essential to a life worth living. But in that case, why aren't I a believer?

There are two reasons. The first is that I can't believe something that I don't believe. Self-deception only takes one so far, and no matter how useful it might be to me in my everyday life if I could manage it, I simply cannot persuade myself that there is a God. God seems as fanciful to me as fairies and Santa Claus. God is a non-starter. But of course, the kind of "persuasion" I seem to be talking about now lies within the realm of evidence and argument. Didn't I just explain that there were different ways of justifying belief, and that pragmatic necessity might, in a certain sense, warrant belief in cases where the belief is indispensable? Quite so. And that brings me to the second rea-

son: God is not the *sine qua non*. As it turns out, God has nothing to do with morality, meaning, love or truth. But then what about faith? While it is true that religion has been instrumental in bringing a kind of faith to many human lives, I believe that there is a deeper and more perfect form available to the atheist. Hard to come by, but worth the effort. In the rest of this paper, I'll try to explain why I believe all this.

Let's start with morality. Many, many people believe that without God, there can be no moral value. William Lane Craig says simply: "If God does not exist, then objective moral values do not exist"<sup>7</sup> and he cites the authority of J. L. Mackie and Friedrich Nietzsche to back him up. But there's a well-known argument that seems to me to show decisively that this claim is false. The argument comes from Plato's dialogue *Euthyphro*, which is concerned with the nature of piety. Early on, Socrates asks the morally zealous Euthyphro what piety is. Euthyphro, after some false starts, finally settles on this: piety is that which is pleasing to the gods. Ah, says Socrates, that raises another question: what is the relation between an act's being pious, and its being pleasing to the gods? Specifically: do the gods love the pious acts because they are pious, or are the acts pious because the gods love them? Euthyphro and the average undergraduate find this question pretty confusing, but with some judicious probing, both eventually see what Socrates is getting at.

Translating the question into modern terms, we get this: supposing that there is a God, and that He loves all (morally) good things, is it the case that He loves them because of their (moral) goodness, or is it rather that it is His loving them that makes them good? Is it, in other words, the goodness of various acts, persons, thoughts, and so forth that accounts for God's loving them, or is it the other way around – that in themselves, they are neither good nor bad, but that God's loving them makes them good? Here's an analogy that sometimes works in my classroom, adapted from an example Sally Haslanger developed in a different context: on the supposition that cool people are popular, we might reasonably wonder whether the popularity is due to the coolness, or whether, instead, the coolness is an artifact of the popularity. My own extensive experience as an unpopular, uncool adolescent leads me to think that it's the second – that there are absolutely no constraints on what can turn out to be cool – it depends entirely – even explicitly – on the arbitrary decrees of the popular set. (When I first wore clogs in 1967, I was a dork. Two months later when Christine Heddleson wore them, they were *in*. Don't get me started.)

You see where I'm going with this. If it is the popular people's decrees that make things cool, if it's being loved by the popular that *constitutes* coolness, then it is, in an important way, *arbitrary* what's cool and what's not. It's to say that the popular have no *reasons* for the decreeing one thing rather than another. For if they had reasons – if there were something about the things they choose in virtue of which those things are cool, then it would be *those other* properties that constituted the coolness, not the mere decree of the popular.

So suppose someone wants to defend this line, to deny that cool is constituted by the consensus of the popular, and affirm that it is constituted instead

by some property that cool things have independently of what the popular decide. It might be thought that taking this position involves rejecting the generalization with which we began, viz., that the popular and the cool coincide. For after all, one might reason, if the popular don't simply determine what's cool, if what's cool is independent of them, isn't there the possibility of their making a mistake, of getting it wrong whether something is cool or not? Well, making coolness an independently existing property does give it a kind of independence from the judgments of the popular, but this is consistent with the popular people always being correct in their judgments of coolness: It's perfectly possible that coolness, being, as it were, *cool*, leads naturally to popularity. We can even add to the story the detail that the popular are, as a matter of objective fact, excellent cool-detectors. We can *rely* on the judgments of the popular to guide us in selecting the cool. That is why, in fact, the judgments of the popular so reliably coincide with the facts about what's cool.

There are clear lessons here: as with the popular, so with God. (If there is a God, He is in all things. Including high school.) If, on the one hand, the theist insists that God is literally the *source* of goodness, that it is God's decree that renders anything good or bad, she is saying, in effect, that God's judgments are not really judgments – they are arbitrary stipulations. “Today I shall wear red and ban murder.” Why *arbitrary*? Because: as in the case of judgments about the cool, if God's judgments about what is morally permissible and what is not are *not* arbitrary, then they are based on something. And then there must be something present in the thing, antecedent to God's judgment, that determines it to be good or bad. In other words, if the things God is choosing among are not *already* good or bad, prior to His choice, how could He be properly said to *choose* among them?

So to say that God chooses, and does not capriciously stipulate, is to concede that goodness and badness exist prior to, and thus independently of, God's decision. And again, as in the case of cool, this position does not conflict with the claim that what God chooses precisely coincides with what is morally good. It simply requires that we take the position that God is a perfect moral agent; that he is absolutely reliable when it comes to telling the good from the bad.

I think this is a real knock-down argument; I'd love to know if anyone can think of an objection to it. But beyond it's being a knock-down argument, I think it shows something important for religious faith. I think that theists especially should take the second of these two views about God and the good, viz., the view that moral good is inherently good, and that God, being Himself perfectly good, prefers it. To accept instead the view that goodness is constituted by God's preferring it seems to me to be a kind of insult to God. This non-recommended view, by the way, is called “divine command theory,” and it has long seemed to me that if divine command theory is true, then God is a petty tyrant, and our attempts at living moral lives are ridiculous. Imagine a parent who arbitrarily chooses foods – not on the basis of their palatability, or their nutritional value, but randomly – and commands her child to eat those and only those foods, and punishes the child if they disobey. A parent who



did this would rightly be thought abusive. If she derived any amusement or satisfaction from watching her child struggle to eat the foods she happened to select, she would be a monster. But how would such a parent be any different from a God who randomly decrees that his creatures shall do this and shall not do that? The only way to maintain a conception of a truly just and loving God, I contend, is to accept that moral value exists independently of God's will.

Consider the story of Abraham and Isaac. This has always bothered me. Here is Abraham, a man deprived of children until his dotage, then finally granted a single son. He loves the child fiercely. Now what happens? God, with whom Abraham has made a pact, demands that Abraham slaughter this son, as a sacrifice. The traditional interpretation of this demand is that God was testing Abraham's faith. This is, I think, pretty harsh, but it's not the part that really bothers me. What really bothers me is that Abraham is prepared to do it – he's prepared to kill his beloved son – *and that that counts as passing the test*. Huh??? Why is God so pleased? What righteous being wants loyalty like that? Here's the way I would have liked the story to go instead: God says, "Abraham, you must sacrifice your only son to me" and Abraham says, "I don't know who you are, buster, but you sure aren't God – God would never ask me to do anything wrong, much less something as grotesquely, outrageously wrong as this." And *then* God would be pleased.

The Abraham story raises another problem for the theist who wants to ground morality in God's commands, and that is the *epistemological* problem of knowing *what God's commands are*. It must be conceded all around, I think, that God has not made Himself entirely clear on this point. There is – to put it mildly – some disagreement about what is, and what is not, the will of God. Being a person of the book doesn't help a great deal; for one thing, there is more than one book, and more than one view about how many books there are. Moreover, the book(s) is(are) written in languages that few contemporary theists know anything about. In point of fact, and despite the protestations of some fundamentalists, the understanding of the sacred texts possessed by the majority of those who consider themselves Jews or Christians is one that has been heavily filtered through translation, interpretation, and inference, so that there can be no credible pretence for any but the most erudite scholars that one knows, never mind believes, the literal Word of God. Moreover, the most potent interpretative tool at the religious person's disposal is, I submit, the following dictum: interpret God's commands so that He comes out commanding what is, in fact, good. I see this at work over and over again, whenever religious people of conscience try to come to grips with some new moral challenge to their particular orthodoxy: feminism, gay rights, abortion, pre-marital sex, euthanasia – the procedure is the same – figure out what's right, attribute that to God.

So here's where I think things stand on the matter of moral value: it is not only not required that there be a God in order for there to be objective moral value; it is (ironically) a more pious approach to theism to assume the existence of an independent moral order. And assuming that the moral order is



independent of God's commands, one obtains the additional pay-off that one has at least some hope of determining what it is that God wants.

On to meaning.

What is it that we want when we want our lives to have meaning? To answer this question, I think we need to start small. What are the kinds of examples we might give from everyday life to illustrate what it is to have meaning? One kind of meaning is "sentimental value." I don't consider this to be a trivial kind of meaning. The things in our lives to which we attach sentimental value are things that serve as tangible reminders of people, events, places that are important to us. In helping us remember, they keep us connected with our pasts; they help us, as some academicians say, to construct a narrative of our lives. They can also serve to revive those feelings that enliven us: the flush of excitement at the beginning of a love affair, the tenderness with which we viewed our newborn child. So "sentimental value" is a kind of meaning that matters to self-conscious creatures, creatures who reflect upon and order their experiences.

Another kind of meaning is purpose. We feel that our actions are meaningful when they are directed at some purpose. If we think that some activities are more meaningful than others, it is often because some activities are done for the sake of something. Notably, we tend to ascribe purpose even to some purposeless activities, activities, that is, that are performed for their own sake, and not for the sake of something else: Reflecting on our needs, as animal creatures, for rest, amusement, and pleasure, we invent the dummy concept, "wellbeing," for which we then "need" relaxation, play and sex. So another kind of meaning is the kind that is invested in those things that further some end of ours.

Both these kinds of meaning are what we might call "agent-centered" – they advert to the values or goals of an agent. But there may be another kind of meaning, one that is not agent-centered. The creation of something beautiful, the discovery of something interesting, the achievement of something morally grand – these are all meaningful accomplishments. Their meanings derive from the inherent value of beauty, knowledge, and goodness. Things done "for the sake of" these or some other value are not exactly things done for the sake of something else – it's not like "the Good" has a set of interests which our morally praiseworthy actions help to further. Nor is it that we perform morally good actions as a means to obtaining the Good. A morally good action is good. Morally good actions are meaningful because they are good.

Still, one might wonder, would this kind of meaning exist if there were no agents? Is this another kind of agent-centered value after all? I really don't know what to say about beauty, because I'm not sure that aesthetic value does not in some way derive from the discriminative capacities of sentient creatures. Knowledge cannot exist without knowers, so if knowledge is valuable, there must be agents around. Ditto for moral value – the value can be absolute, but there will be no instantiations of it unless there are moral agents.

One more point: the agent-centered values of the second sort – the ones

where meaning comes from the fact that one is furthering some purpose – may now appear in a new light. Actions done for a purpose, cannot, if they are to be meaningful, be done for just any old purpose – they must be done for a purpose that bottoms out, either in something that is meaningful to me, the agent, or else in something that is valuable in an agent-independent way. Studying at college is meaningful, perhaps, because doing so will enable one to become a doctor. Being a doctor is a meaningful occupation because it helps people. Helping people is inherently valuable.

Significantly, many of us look for meaning in our occupations; we want the purpose of our work to be something more than merely keeping us alive. Famously, Marx contended that one of the forms of alienation distinctive of capitalism was the worker's "alienation from his species being." By this Marx meant that work – that which should express the worker's distinctively human capacity to transform matter in accordance with his own intentions – becomes the mere means to keep the worker animal alive: one works to live instead of living to work.

So in everyday affairs, we can find the following sources of meaning: our own interests and values, whatever they happen to be, and the things we recognize as valuable in their own right: moral goodness, knowledge, and so forth. That's quite a lot of meaning, when you think of it. Why do we need more? Why do so many people seem to have the feeling that if that's all there is, then there'd be no point in going on? Why aren't these sources of meaning – which are, after all, what most of us rely on most of the time – enough? It may be that there's a fallacy in the air: one might think that, if meaning is attached to activities when they are done for some purpose, then there must be some ultimate purpose for which everything is done, on pain of infinite regress. But we've already seen that there is no threat of regress. As long as there are *some* sources of inherent value, the meaning of activities done for the sake of something can be grounded. There doesn't have to be the same grounded source of meaning for every activity.

But leave that aside. Suppose we could make out the case for some kind of ultimate meaning, the Mother of all meaning, the source of all value that grounds all instrumentally important things. Why think that that could be God?

What are the possibilities here? One is that God, as an agent, has purposes, and that it therefore gives my life meaning to try to fulfill them. But in ordinary life, we do not generally think that the mere fact that someone else has some purpose – getting in shape to run a marathon, for example – has implications for what will be meaningful in our lives. That's not to say that we do not do things for the sake of others. Indeed we do, and "other people" should go on the list of sources of inherent meaning. And we do, also, sometimes devote ourselves to an agenda set by someone else, as when we work for someone's campaign. But in those cases, it is not the fact that we are doing something for someone else's purposes that carries the significance – rather it's the value of the objective that makes the work important. And it doesn't matter for this issue whether the value attaching to the goal is inherent, or derivative

from interests of one's own. If I decide to dedicate my fortunes to helping the career of the world's leading tiddly winks player, and her career flourishes as a result of my investment, then I'm getting good value for my money – I'm getting meaning. Still – to return to the main point – my determination to make tiddly winks an Olympic sport doesn't give *you* any reason to support my efforts. Enthusiasms of this sort are idiosyncratic; my having such an enthusiasm gives no reason for anyone else to have it, too.

So if God's purposes are similarly idiosyncratic, it's difficult to see why one should feel one's life would be more meaningful if one fulfilled God's purposes than if one "merely" fulfilled one's own. But now it will surely be objected that God is different; He's not just any old "other person." In particular, God doesn't have purposes that are capricious or idiosyncratic. We can count on God to have *good* purposes, purposes that involve the creation of beauty and the development of our distinctive capacities. But now we're back in the company of Euthyphro. If the reason that fulfilling God's purposes gives meaning to our lives is that His purposes are inherently excellent, then the fact that they are *God's* purposes plays no essential role – the excellence of the purposes stands alone.

One other reason that people might feel that life would be meaningless without God is that they are troubled by the extreme transiency of our achievements, indeed of our lives. One hundred years from now, who will remember this? Who will remember me? God, that's who. God, being eternal, is always available for recognizing and appreciating. God will always remember our good works, even after our sun has super-nova'ed. But I'm not sure why this thought should be particularly comforting. The assumption underlying it seems to me to be disturbing – the assumption is that it's pointless to care about things that are going to go away. I think quite the reverse is true – loving something, caring about it, despite knowing that it will not always be with you (or that you will no longer be with it) seems to me to represent a particular kind of courage. I can only imagine the bravery of parents to whom are born extremely ill or congenitally afflicted children, who must commit their hearts fully to a person who they know may be with them only a short time. Surely the value of that which is valuable – and what is more valuable than a person? – is not a function of how long the valuable thing survives. While it's there, it's there, and it can ground meaning as well as anything else.

What about love?

For most, if not all, human beings, love is a necessity. This is true in the most straightforward, literal way, as well as in deeper ways. We are a species with a long period of immaturity. It is not until we are four years old or so that we can do even the most minimally necessary things for ourselves, and even then, of course, we would be extremely vulnerable without the protection of an adult. (The more complex our societies become, the longer the period of functional immaturity.) What, except love, would induce adults to devote to – it must be said – largely ungrateful juveniles the immense amount of care and attention necessary to bring these juveniles to the point of even probable

self-sufficiency? (Someone's going to bring up evolution at this point – adults don't *really* love their children, they'll say; what we call "love" is simply an adaptive response that functions to ensure the preservation of our gene-carriers. Such claims evince a confusion: even if it's true that natural selection *explains why* we love, it hardly shows *thereby*, that there's no such thing as love.)

Of course, parental love is not the only form of love; there is also romantic love, and the kind of love involved in deep friendships. We also seem to be capable of, and to thrive on, a kind of love of or for abstractions – we at least express love-like feelings for such things as countries and principles. And as we give love, so do we seem to want – need – to receive love. "Unrequited love" is the stock-in-trade of human drama; reciprocity is a part of the ideal, if not always the reality, of love

But love turns out to be difficult to obtain, and once obtained, fragile. The things we love, are, for the most part, mortal. The prospect of losing a loved one is sometimes so painful that people choose not to love at all (at least if the pop psychology books are to be believed). Alternatively, some people become so desperate for love that they endure humiliation and even physical abuse for the sake of some few crumbs of something that can pass, now and then, for love.

I suggest that one of the reasons that the need for love is so powerful among human beings is that love confirms one's own *value*. If I am loved, then I am *loveable*. If I am a source of meaning for someone else, then I am a source of meaning, *simpliciter*. Being loved by someone else, particularly by someone whom one loves in return, provides a short route to this knowledge, and an argument the force of which can be felt in the gut. If I was right before, if human beings are valuable in themselves, then perhaps this sort of demonstration shouldn't be necessary. But life being as it is, and humans being as we are, the proposition that we are each inherently valuable can be hard to really grasp, absent the testimony provided by the caring gaze of another person.

Another thing that can make it difficult to remember that one is inherently valuable is the fact that we are, each of us, flawed. We're ugly, or we're fat, or we have bad skin; we have a tendency to lie our way out of a tight spot, we drink too much, we're lazy; we disappoint our spouses, we don't spend enough time with our kids. In short, we're just not nearly as good as we'd like to be. Every day, it may seem, brings new evidence that we are *not*, in fact, lovable. So in light of our many faults, how much less likely is love?

How wonderful, then, if there were someone *guaranteed* to love us; and how much more wonderful if that someone was guaranteed to exist! To be always there, faithful and unchanging in His love. And how superlatively wonderful if the wonderfulness of this perfect Lover were also guaranteed. To be loved by the most perfect Being possible – how could one doubt one's lovableness in the face of such affection?

So it's not mysterious why mere mortals might wish for a God. The problem comes in getting from the wish to the belief. After all, it's not immediately evident, if one looks around at the variety of ills that routinely afflict us, that any such universal lover exists. This is a "loving parent," after all, who punishes the dutiful alongside – indeed, sometimes instead of – the perverse. Being the

beneficiary of divine love, therefore, does not ensure that anyone will experience *any* of the comforts that normally flow from the human variety. I may have the Cause of Being in my corner, but this does not mean that I won't get sucker-punched in the very next round.

Now I am, in a way, raising the familiar "problem of evil," but for a different purpose than is usual.<sup>8</sup> I am not now raising it in order to question the possibility of a loving and omnipotent God, nor even to suggest that we lack good evidence for the existence of such a God. Rather, I am raising a question about the phenomenology of the experience of "Divine love." From the point of view of our ordinary expectations, if God were a husband, many of us would be battered wives. God loves us all, we're told. But in that case, it must be consistent with God's love that we be abandoned, starved, maimed, gassed by Nazis, bombed by Americans. Knowing that, how does belief in God's love *sustain* anyone?<sup>9</sup> When I pose this sort of question to my religious friends (yes, some of my best friends....) they tell me, with or without a condescending smile, that the effect of God's love on their lives is different from the kind of effect I'm looking for. The word they use, again and again, is "transformation." Knowing that God loves them, they say, changes them so that they see the world differently, so that they see other people differently. Sometimes they put this in terms of "grace" – awareness of God's love, they say, is an awareness of the world *as infused with* God's grace.

Often – not always, but often enough – when I listen to these people talk in this way, and when I reflect on their lives, and on their way of being in the world, I begin to see something of what they're talking about. I see people with, first, a real capacity for joy, and second, with a kind of equilibrium, a steadiness in the midst of the turmoil into which life is constantly erupting. I see sensitive and perceptive people – people who do not deny the reality of pain, but are not dominated by their consciousness of it. Above all, I see in these people a caring regard for *other* people – a sustained appreciation of the human that is not predicated on individual achievements or merits, an attitude as close as any human attitude can come to unconditional love.

I believe the Christian term for this is *agape*, and its possibility seems to me to be the single best prudential argument for religion that could ever be made. But even this argument is not good enough. One of the things I've realized over the years as I've been engaged in peace work together with religious people is that the kind of transformation they ascribe to their apprehension of Divine love is due, really, to their own efforts. Everything that they see in this mortal world that moves them, everything that testifies, in their minds, to God's loving nature, has been there all the time. The "transformation" they experience is self-induced: it amounts to a willful alteration of focus, an enlargement of the capacity for attention. They become people who *choose to see* what there is to value in other people, and to fend off the distractions amply provided by our all-too-human failings.

Why, after all, is it said that God created human beings in "His own image?" It cannot be that human beings had first come to know God's nature, and

then saw it reflected in themselves. No theologian would be so impious as to suggest that: if it is not an article of faith that God's nature is unknowable, it is still reckoned to be, in its fullness, beyond human comprehension. Rather (as I believe the standard story goes), we find in *ourselves* qualities, or least potentialities, that we can recognize as having transcendent value, and as being, in this way, divine. When our grasp of these qualities – our subjectivity, our ability to generate meaning by creating ends, our capacity for joy and for pain, our awareness of a world around us, and above all, our ability to apprehend that our fellow human beings also possess these qualities – when our grasp of all this becomes sure and reliable, then we *do* come to see the world in a new way.

The ability to “love” other people in this special and somewhat peculiar sense of “love” gives rise, I think, to an ability to love ourselves. By that I mean: when we become fully alive to the humanity of every person, when we become able to see every person as – in Kantian terms – an end in himself, then we become able to see and appreciate ourselves in the same way. (One religious basis for objecting to suicide is that it is the destruction of one of God's children, something no one of us has the right to do. This reasoning seems to me insightful, if not terribly helpful to the despondent person.) What I have in mind is the development of a *habit* of sympathy, a recognition that we all come into this world equipped, to a large extent, with the same basic equipment, and responsible to the same set of basic imperatives. If we can come to see how, for example, rude behavior can be the result of frustration, exhaustion, disappointment, anxiety, ignorance, or even just a poverty of spirit, then we can begin to see acts of rudeness committed against us in something like the light in which we are accustomed to viewing and excusing such acts when we commit them ourselves. And it works the other way, too: if we are harsher on ourselves than on others, a habit of agape can remind us that we are, ourselves, “only human” – no more obliged to be perfect than the next person. “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us:” an appeal and a resolution at the same time.

The vulnerabilities that I spoke of earlier, may, perhaps, be mitigated to a large extent if this view of persons can be cultivated and maintained. The assurance that one is, at core, a valuable thing, worthy of respect and care, can be sustaining even if one cannot achieve or preserve all of the more familiar loving relationships one might wish for.

This, then, is the “faith” of an atheist: the sustaining belief that humankind is worth something. It is not a belief based on wishful thinking, but based instead on a clearheaded recognition of both the potentialities and limitations inherent in this human life. And it has this advantage over theistic faith: it is not hostage to the truth of a myth. There is nothing that I need believe that goes beyond evidence that lies plainly about me, that may be threatened by the latest discoveries of science or of history. It is, I claim, the firmest faith of all.

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1 You can read a transcript of the debate at [http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/doug\\_jesseph/](http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/doug_jesseph/)

2 David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1980) Fourth Printing, p. 5.

3 I thank Amy-Hope Dyson for the suggestion of putting the matter in this light.

4 Hume, pp. 6-7.

5 For a discussion of the difference between these two kinds of reasons for believing, see Gilbert Harman, "Pragmatism and Reasons for Belief," in *Reasoning, Meaning, and Mind* (Oxford, Clarendon Press of Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 93-116.

6 I've left out beauty, that's for sure. But I don't have anything much to say about beauty *vis a vis* God. I've also left out truth and knowledge. The issue with these is that I'm not sure they're real consensus candidates, and in any case, I don't imagine that nearly as many people think these require God as do the other things on my list, Descartes notwithstanding. Let me also register the fact that many philosophers reject the conception of morality presupposed in my characterization of what all of humanity wants. That's as may be – I'm still betting I've got it right about what we think we need.

7 Craig, op. cit.

8 This is the problem of reconciling the perfect benevolence and omnipotence of God with the existence of suffering.

9 It's like Joni Mitchell says in her song "The Last Time I Saw Richard": "I am as constant as the Northern Star"/ "Constant in the darkness?/ Where's that at!/ If you want me, I'll be in the bar."